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## Helping artists share their work: Redwood City's Dragon Theater sets its eyes on being a community resource

February 04, 2017, 05:00 AM By [Anna Schuessler](#) Daily Journal

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It's safe to say that Meredith Hagedorn has learned a thing or two about bringing live theater productions to life on a shoestring budget.

Hagedorn started the Dragon Theatre in 2000 with a dream to produce plays telling the stories she wanted to tell, and without a physical location. Seven years later, she found herself entering a five-year lease on an office space in downtown Palo Alto with \$12,000 in the theater's bank account.

Now in the theater's fifth year in Redwood City and 17th year since she started it, Hagedorn and her team have been unlocking stories their audience members might have never encountered otherwise, showcasing an average of eight lesser-known plays at the 65-person theater each year. As the theater prepares for a packed season in 2017, she and her team are ready to share what they have learned with aspiring artists and other community organizations.

"It took a couple years for people to say, 'Oh yeah, the Dragon Theatre, I've been meaning to go,'" she said.

Just as the theater's name recognition has spread among its supporters, it has also spread throughout community organizations and even small startups looking for a space to meet. Kimberly Wadycki, the theater's managing director, has been with the theater for the past six years, and said it is starting to take on a role as a community resource, a place where organizations with no space to call their own can meet.

"Rent is something that informs everything in Silicon Valley," she said. "There are a lot of community organizations that have programs that don't have a home."

Wadycki said she has been in conversation with church groups and libraries looking for space for workshops and after-school programming. She and Hagedorn are hoping to better utilize the theater and classroom spaces at its 2120 Broadway location during the day, when the theater's schedule is free of rehearsals and plays.

For Hagedorn, the struggle to find space is one she remembers well. She said the theater's productions traveled all over the Bay Area when it first started, from conference rooms to schools and any other available venue. After seven years of this "nomadic" lifestyle, Hagedorn realized the theater would need a permanent home to thrive.

"I decided I was tired of the shows living in my car, we really thought it would be key to have a specific space that you knew you were going to go," she said.

Even after Hagedorn settled on a 2,000-square-foot office space off Alma Street in downtown Palo Alto, the path to meet all of the theater's expenses was a long one. She quickly learned how to negotiate a path toward the appropriate tenant improvements and the budget necessary to operate a theater as well as its individual productions.

"We built the first theater on eight credit cards," she said. "I just kept doing balance transfers, I didn't know when it would end."

A year and a half later, the theater was out of debt because of Hagedorn's commitment to leveraging the resources she had, finding creative ways to use the same costumes and technical equipment for the wide variety of stories the theater was telling.

These lessons are ones the theater is eager to pass along to aspiring theater performers. Close to half of the theater's shows are dedicated to their 2nd Stages Series, which gives emerging directors and actors a chance to bring productions, or their versions of them, to life. Though the theater supports the projects with some seed funding, the guidance the staff provides on concepts like marketing, ticket sales and fundraising proves powerful for less experienced playwrights.

"It's not something you can learn in school, how to bring it all together," said Wadycki.

Wadycki and Hagedorn have created protocol and benchmarks for all the aspects of making a production possible that most never consider. They've worked out everything from how to get several actresses with wide skirts through a small door to make an entrance, to how to fundraise for a production and pay actors a fair wage for their work. They are eager to pass their knowledge and love of theater onto a new generation.

"We are training the next audience. We do want them to have an appreciation for theater and to actually teach however we can," said Hagedorn.



**Anna Schuessler/Daily Journal**  
Kimberly Wadycki, managing director of the Dragon Theatre in Redwood City, with founder Meredith Hagedorn on stage.



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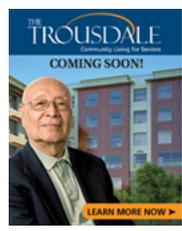
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Though the theater is doing its best to extend a hand to other groups of artists and organizations, it is not immune to the same challenges of operating in the Bay Area that its partners are facing. With rising rent this year and overhead costs that won't budge, the theater will continue to use creativity to support the shows slated for 2017, which will feature powerful female roles and casts as well as voices from marginalized groups.

Hagedorn said all of the actors performing in Dragon Theatre plays live in the Bay Area, and almost all of them have day jobs. Scheduling times when cast members can rehearse is increasingly challenging, with staff members working long into the night to accommodate practices after normal business hours.

"It's getting harder and harder to do what we do," she said. "Being in the Bay Area, you have to work around their conflicts. If you can't be an actor full time and have all your other priorities go out the window when you are cast in a show," she said.

Hagedorn said the theater receives about half of its support from ticket sales and venue rentals, and the other half from contributions, the majority of which come from individuals. She is hoping venue rentals from other events and community organizations help with a recent rise in rent, but is working closely with the theater's board and advisors to draw more people into shows.

But for the team at the Dragon Theatre, even these obstacles do not stand in the way of bringing non-traditional productions to a vibrant community looking for thought-provoking art.

"Everyone who comes here they talk about how it makes them look at their own lives differently," said Hagedorn.

For Wadycki, the fact that fewer people ask her what the Dragon Theatre does is encouraging. She noted that more people attend shows and are reflecting fondly on their own experiences with performing arts.

"The number of people who have come to our productions and said, 'When I was in high school, I was a backstage hand, or I was in the band,'" she said. "It's about getting people to remember that that is a critical part of their childhood and we are giving people tools to express themselves."

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